Full text of "The Open Society And Its Enemies Vol I"

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THE OPEN SOCIETY
AND ITS ENEMIES
THE SPELL OF PLATO

THE OPEN SOCIETY
AND ITS ENEMIES

by K. R. POPPER

Volume I

THE SPELL OF PLATO

It will be seen . . , that the Erewhonians
are a meek and long-suffering people, easily led
by the nose, and quick to offer up common
sense . . . when a philosopher arises among
them . . . SAMUEL BUTLER.

PREFACE

If in this book harsh words are spoken about some of the
greatest among the intellectual leaders of mankind, my motive
is not, I hope, the wish to belittle them. It springs rather from
my conviction that if we wish our civilization to survive we must
break with the habit of deference to great men. Great men
may make great mistakes ; and as the book tries to show, some
of the greatest leaders of the past supported the perennial attack
on freedom and reason. Their influence, too rarely challenged,
continues to mislead those on whose defence civilization depends,
and to divide them. The responsibility for this tragic and
possibly fatal division becomes ours if we hesitate to be outspoken
in our criticism of what admittedly is part of our intellectual
heritage. By our reluctance to criticize a part of it, we may
help to destroy it all.

The book is a critical introduction to the philosophy of
politics and of history, and an examination of some of the
principles of social reconstruction. Its aim and the line of
approach are indicated in the Introduction. Even where it looks
back into the past, its problems are the problems of our own
time ; and I have tried hard to make it as simple as possible,
hoping to clarify matters which concern us all.

Although the book presupposes nothing but open-mindedness
in the reader, its object is not so much to popularize the questions
treated as to solve them. In order to serve this double purpose,
all matters of more specialized interest have been confined to
the notes collected at the end of the book.

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and has made many suggestions for its improvement. Miss
Helen Hervey has put a great deal of work into the compilation
of the Index.

I am deeply indebted to Professor F. A. von Hayek. Without
his interest and support the book would not have been published.
Dr. E. Gombrich has undertaken to see the book through the
press, a burden to which was added the strain of an exacting
correspondence between England and New Zealand. He has
been so helpful that I can hardly say how much I owe to him.

K. R. P.
CHRISTCHURCH,
April 1944.

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PAOB

THE OPEN SOCIETY AND ITS ENEMIES
INTRODUCTION

Concerning metaphysics . . , I admit that my
formulations may here or there have been insuffi-
ciently conditional and cautious. Yet I do not
wish to hide the fact that I can only look with
repugnance . . upon the puffed-up pretentious-
ness of all these volumes filled with wisdom, such
as are fashionable nowadays. For I am fully
satisfied that . . the accepted methods must end-
lessly increase these follies and blunders, and
that even the complete annihilation of all these
fanciful achievements could not possibly be as
harmful as this fictitious science with its accursed
fertility.

KANT.

This book raises a number of issues which may not be apparent
from the table of contents.

It sketches some of the difficulties faced by a civilization
which aims at humaneness and reasonableness, at. equality and
freedom ; a civilization which is still in its infancy, and which
continues to grow in spite of the fact that it has been betrayed
by so many of the intellectual leaders of mankind. It attempts |
to show that this civilization has not yet fully recovered from
the shock of its birth, the transition from the tribal or * closedl
society ', with its submission to magical forces, to the * open
society ' which sets free the critical powers of man. It attempts
to show that the shock of this transition is one of the factors that
have made possible the rise of those reactionary movements
which have tried, and still try, to overthrow civilization and to
return to tribalism. And it suggests that what we call nowadays
totalitarianism belongs to these movements, which are just as
old or just as young as our civilization itself.

It tries thereby to contribute to our understanding of totali-
tarianism, andofthe significance of the perennial Jjght againstjt.

It furthertries to examine the application of the critical and

rational methods of science to the problems of the open society.
It analyses the principles of democratic social reconstruction, the
principles of what I may term * piecemen.1 Social engineering * in
opposition to c Utopian social engineering ' (as explained in
Chapter g). t And it tries to clear away some of the obstacles

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impeding a rational approach to the problems of social recon-
struction. It does so by criticizing those social philosophies which
are responsible for the widespread prejudice against the pos-
sibilities jrf democratic reform. The most powerful of these
reactionary philosophies Ts~ one whicR I have called historicism.
The story of the rise and influence of some important forms of
historicism is one of the main topics of the book, which might
even be described as a collection of marginal notes on the develop-
ment of certain historicist philosophies. A few remarks on the
origin of the book will indicate what is meant by historicism and
how it is connected with the other issues mentioned.

Although my main interests are the methods of physics (and
consequently certain technical problems which are far removed
from those treated in this book), I have also been interested for
many years in the problem of the backwardness of the social
sciences. This is, of course, nothing but the problem of their
method. My interest in this problem was greatly stimulated by
the rise of totalitarianism, and by the failure of the various social
sciences and social philosophies to make sense of it.

In this connection, one point appeared to me particularly urgent.

Too often we hear it suggested that some form or other of
totalitarianism is inevitable. Many who because of their ii^elli;-
gence^ and[traimng _shoulc^ be held responsible for what they
say, announce that there is no escape from it. They ask us
whether we are really naive enough to believe that democracy
can be permanent ; whether we do not see that it is just one of
the many forms of government that come and go in the course
of history. They argue that democracy, in order to fight
totalitarianism, is forced to copy its methods and thus to become
totalitarian itself. Or they assert that our industrial system
cannot continue to function without adopting the methods of
collectivist planning, and they infer from the inevitability of a
collectivist economic system that the adoption of totalitarian
forms of social life is also inevitable.

Such arguments may sound plausible enough. But plausi-
bility is not a reliable guide in such matters. In fact, one should
not enter into a discussion of these specious arguments before!

having considered the following question of method : Is it within the power of any social science to make such sweeping historical prophecies ? Can we texpect to get more than the irresponsible! reply of the soothsayer if we ask a man what the future has in store for mankind ?

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This is a question of the method of the social sciences. It is clearly more fundamental than any debate on any particular argument offered in support of any historical prophecy.

A careful examination of this question has led me to the conviction that such sweeping historical prophecies are entirely beyond the scope of scientific method. The future depends on ourselves, and we do not depend on any historical necessity. There are, however, influential social philosophies which hold the opposite view. They claim that everybody tries to use his brains to predict impending events ; that it is certainly legitimate for a strategist to try to foresee the outcome of a battle ; and that the boundaries between such a prediction and more sweeping historical prophecies are fluid. They maintain that it is the task of science in general to make predictions, or rather, to improve .upon our everyday predictions, and to put them upon a more secure basis ; and that it is the task of the social sciences in particular to furnish us with long-term historical prophecies. They also believe that they have discovered laws of history which enable them to prophesy the course of historical events. The various social philosophies which raise claims of this kind, I have grouped together under the name historicism. Elsewhere, in The Poverty of Historicism (Economic^ 1944/45), I have tried to argue against these claims, and to show that in spite of their glausibilitY^thgy^ arc ^based^-jpnu-^L gross j^jsirnJgr f stanH^ng. jrf scientific^ method. While engaged in the systematic analysis ancTcriticism of thejiain^ I tried as well to

collect some material to illustrate its development. The notes collected for that purpose constitute the main part of this book.

The systematic analysis of historicism aims at something like scientific status. This book does not. Many of the opinions expressed are personal. What it owes to scientific method is largely the awareness of its limitations : it does not offer proofs where nothing can be proved, nor does it pretend to be scientific where it cannot give more than a personal point of view. It does not tryjaj-eplace the old systems of philosophy by a new system. iTdoes not try to add to all these volumes^fille^T with wisdom, to the metaphysics of history and destiny, such as are fashion- able nowadays. It rather tries tojhow that this propheticjmsdom is harmful, that the rr^et^hysi^^histgrjr impede the applica- tion~ot the "piecein<[alj^ sojcjal

reformr^ Xn3T It furtheFlnes to show how we may become the
niaEers of our fate when we have ceased To pose asTtsTprophets.

4 INTRODUCTION

In tracing the development of historicism, I found that the
dangerous liabit^of hutorical prophecy, so widespread among our
intellectual leaders, has various^ functions. It is always flattering
to belong to the inner circle of the initiated, and to possess the
unusual power of predicting the course of history. Besides, there
is a tradition that intellectual leaders are giftejd with such powers,
and not to possess them may~Ieadjto lpss.x>f_a&te. The danger,
on the other hahd7 of their being unmasked as charlatans is very
small, since they can always point out that it is certainly per-
missible to make less sweeping predictions ; and the boundaries
between these and augury are fluid.

But there are sometimes further motives for holding historicist
beliefs. The prophets who announce that certain events are
bound to happen make propaganda for them, and help to bring
them about. Their stcu^^a^emocracy^ is nqtjq last for ever
is as Jtrue, and as little to the point, as the assertion that human
reason Is not to last for ever, since only democracy provides an
institutional framework that permits reform without violence,
and so the use of reason in political matters. But their story
te^ids_tc^discpurage those^who fight totalitarianism ; its motive
is to support the revolt^against ^ivilizatibn. A further motive,
it seems, can~6e found if we consider that historicist metaphysics
are apt to relieve men from the strain of their responsibilities.
If you know that things are bbund to happen whatever you do,
then you may feel free to give up the fight against them. Th
tendency of historicism to support the revolt against civilization
may be due to the fact that it is itself largely a reaction against
the strain of our civilization, and its demand for personal
responsibility.

These last allusions are somewhat vague, but they must suffice
for an introduction. They will later be substantiated by historical
material, especially in the chapter ' The Open Society and Its
Enemies '. I was tempted to place this chapter at the beginning
of the book ; with its topicaj interest, it would certainly have
made a more inviting introduction. But I found that the full
weight of this historical interpretation cannot be felt unless
it is preceded by the material discussed earlier in the book. It
seems that one has first to be disturbed by the identity of the
Platonic theory of justice with the theory, and j^rajctice of .modern
totaHtar^ how urgent it is to interpret

these matters.

THE OPEN SOCIETY AND ITS ENEMIES

VOL. I
THE SPELL OF PLATO

For the Open Society (about 430 B.C.) :

Although only a few may originate a policy,
we are all able to judge it.

PERICLES OF ATHENS.

Against the Open Society (about 80 years later) :

The greatest principle of all is that nobody,
whether male or female, should be without
a leader. Nor should the mind of anybody
be habituated to letting him do anything at
all on his own initiative ; neither out of zeal,
nor even playfully. But in war as well as in
the midst of peace to his leader he shall
direct his eye and follow him faithfully. And
even in the smallest matter he should stand
under leadership. For example, he should
get up, or move, or wash, or take his meals
. . only if he has been told to do so . . In
a word, he should teach his soul, by long
habit, never to dream of acting independently,
and in fact, to become utterly incapable of it.
PLATO OF ATHENS.

THE MYTH OF DESTINY

CHAPTER 1 : HISTORICISM AND THE MYTH OF

DESTINY

It is widely believed that a truly scientific and philosophical
attitude towards politics, and a deeper understanding of social
life in general, must be based upon a contemplation and intei
pretation of human history. While the ordinary man takes the
setting of his life and the importance of hi$ personal experiences
and struggles for granted, it is said that the social scientist or
philosopher has to survey things from a higher plane. He sees
the individual as a pawn, as a rather insignificant instrument in

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the general development of mankind. And the really important!
actors on the Stage of History he may find, perhaps, in th<
Great Nations and their Great Leaders, or perhaps in the Grea
Classes, or in the Great Ideas. However this may be, he will ti
to understand the meaning of the play which is performed on
that Stage ; he will try to understand the laws of historical
development. If he succeeds in this, he will, of course, be able
to predict future developments. He might then put politics upon
a solid basis, and give us practical advice by telling us which
political actions are likely to succeed or likely to fail.

This is a brief description of an attitude which I call historicism.
It is an old idea, or rather, a connected set of ideas which
unfortunately have become so much a part of our spiritual
atmosphere that they are usually taken for granted, and hardly,
ever questioned. I have tried elsewhere to show that. JJie
historicist approach to the social sciences gives gopr results. I
have also tried to outline a method which, I believe, would yield
better results.

But if historicism is a faulty method that produces worthless
results, then it may be useful to see how it originated, and how
^succeeded in entrenching itself so successfully. A historical
sketch undertaken with this aim can, at the same time, serve to
analyse the variety of ideas which have gradually accumulated
around the central historicist doctrine that history is controlled
by developmental laws whose discovery would enable us to
prophesy the destiny of man.

Hjstoricism, which I have so far characterized only in a
rather abstract way, can be well illustrated by one of the simplest
and oldest of its forms, the doctrine of the chosen people. This
doctrine is one of the attempts to make history understandable
by a theistic interpretation, i.e. by recognizing God as the author
of the play performed on the Historical Stage. The theory of
the chosen people, more specifically, assumes that God has
selected one people to function as the instrument of His will,
and that this people will inherit the earth.

In this doctrine, the law of historical development is laid
down by the Will of God. This is the specific difference which
distinguishes the theistic form from other forms of historicism.
A naturalistic historicism, for instance, might treat the develop-
mentaHaw as aJaw of nature ; a spiritual historicism would treat
it as a law of spiritual development ; an ec
aerain. as a law of economic development.

shares with these other forms the doctrine that there is a develop-
mental law which can be discovered, and upon which predictions
regarding the future of mankind can be based.

There is no doubt that the doctrine of the chosen people grew
out of the tribal form of social life. Tribalism, i.e. the emphasis
on the supreme importance of the tribe without which the
individual is nothing at all, is an element which we shall find
in many forms of historicist theories. Other forms which are
not tribalist may still retain the element of collectivism l : they
may still emphasize the significance of some collective or group
without which the individual is nothing at all. Another aspect
of the doctrine of the chosen people is the remoteness of what it
proffers as the end of history. For although it may describe
this end with some degree of definiteness, we have to go a long
way before we reach it. And the way is not only long, but
winding, leading up and down, right and left. Accordingly, it
will be possible to bring every conceivable historical event well
within the scheme of the interpretation. Nothing can contradict
it. 2 But to those who believe in it, it gives certainty regarding
the ultimate outcome of human history.

A criticism of the theistic interpretation of history will be
attempted in the last chapter of this book, where it will also be
shown that some of the greatest Christian thinkers have repudiated
it as idolatry. An attack upon this form of historicism should
therefore not be interpreted as an attack upon religion. In the
present chapter, the doctrine of the chosen people serves only as
an illustration. Its value as such can be seen from the fact
that its chief characteristics 3 are shared by the two most important
modern versionsjDf Ws^oricism whose analysis will form the major
part of this book the histoxical^^iilosophy of racialism or
fascisnTon the one (the right) hand ancTtne Marxian historical
philosophy on the other (the left). For the chosen people
racialism substitutes the chosen race (of Gobineau's choice), se-
lected as the instrument of destin^, ultimately to inherit the earth.
Marx's historical philosophy substitutes for it the chosen class,
the instrument for the creation of the classless society, and at the
same time, the class destined to inherit the earth. Both theories
base their historical forecasts on an interpretation of history
which leads to the discovery of a law of its development. In
the case of racialism, this is thought of*as a kind of natural law.
The biological superiority of the blood of the chosen race explains
the course* of history, past, present, aijd future ; it is nothing

but the struggle of races for mastery. In the case of Marx's

philosophy of history, the law is economic ; all history has to be interpreted as a struggle of classes for economic supremacy.

The historicist character of these two movements makes our investigation topical. We shall return to them in later parts of this book. Each of them goes back directly to the philosophy of Hegel. We must, therefore, deal with that philosophy as well. And since Hegel in the main follows certain ancient philosophers, it will be necessary to discuss the theories of Heraclitus, Plato and Aristotle, before returning to the more modern forms of historicism.

CHAPTER 2 : HERACLITUS

It is not until Heraclitus, that we find in Greece theories which could be compared in their historicist character with the doctrine of the chosen people. In Homer's theistic interpreta-tion, history is the product of divine will. But the Homeric

$ lay down no general laws for its development. What
omer tries to stress and to explain is not the unity of history, but rather its lack of unity. The author of the play on the Stage of History is not one God ; a whole variety of gods dabble in it. What the Homeric interpretation shares with the Jewish is a certain vague feeling of destiny, and the idea of powers behind the scene. But the ultimate destiny, according to Homer, is not disclosed to men. Unlike the Jewish, it remains mysterious.

The first Greek to introduce a more markedly historicist element was Hesiod, when he made use of the idea of a general trend or tendency in historical development. His interpretation of history is pessimistic. He believes that mankind, in their development down from the golden age, are destined to degenerate, both physically and morally. The culmination of the various historicist ideas proffered by the early Greek philosophers came with Plato, who elaborated his theory in an attempt to interpret the history and social life of the Greek tribes, and especially of the Athenians. In his historicism he was strongly influenced by various forerunners, especially by Hesiod. But the most important influence came from Heraclitus.

Heraclitus was the philosopher who discovered the idea of change. Down to his time, philosophers viewed the world as the totality of things, or as a huge edifice built up of these things. The questions they asked themselves were such as these : * What does the world consist of ? J or How is it constructed, what is its true ground-plan ? ' l . They considered philosophy, or physics (the two were indistinguishable for a long time) as the investigation of * nature ', i.e. of the original material out of which this edifice, the world, had been built. As far as any

processes were considered, they were thought of either as going
on within the edifice, or else as constricting or maintaining it,
disturbing and restoring the stability or balance of a structure
which wa$ considered to be fundamentally static. This very

IO THE MYTH OF DESTINY

natural approach, natural even to many of us to-day, was super-
seded by the genius of Heraclitus. The view he introduced was
that there was no such edifice ; that the world was not a more
or less stable structure, but rather one colossal process ; that it
was not the sum-total of all things, but rather the totality of all
events, or changes, or facts. c Everything is in flux and nothing
is at rest', is the motto of his philosophy. 2

Heraclitus' discovery influenced the development of Greek
philosophy for a long time. The philosophies of Parmenides,
Democritus, Plato, and Aristotle, can all be appropriately
described as attempts to solve the problems of that changing
world which Heraclitus had discovered. The greatness of this
discovery can hardly be overrated. It has been described as a
terrifying one, and its effect has been compared with that of * an
earthquake, in which everything . . seems to sway ' 3 . And
I do not doubt that this discovery was impressed upon Heraclitus
by terrifying personal experiences suffered as a result of the
social and political disturbances of his day. Heraclitus, the first
philosopher to deal not only with ' nature ' but even more with
ethico-political problems, lived in an age of social revolution.
It was iri his time that the Greek tribal aristocracies were beginning
to yield to the new force of democracy.

In order to understand the effect of this revolution, we must
remember the stability and rigidity of social life in a tribal
aristocracy. Social life is determined by social and religious
taboos ; everybody has his assigned place within the whole of
the social structure ; everyone feels that his place is the proper,
the c natural ' place, assigned to him by the forces which rule the
world ; everyone ' knows his place '.

Heraclitus 5 own place was that of heir to the royal family of
priest kings of Ephesus, but he resigned in favour of his brother.
In spite of his proud refusal to mix himself up with the political
life of his city, he supported the cause of the aristocrats who
tried in vain to stem the risihg tide of the new revolutionary
forces. These experiences in the social or political field are
reflected in the remaining fragments of his work. 4 * The
Ephesians ought to hang themselves man by man, all the adults,
and leave the city to be ruled by infants . . .', is one of his
outbursts, occasioned, by the people's decision to expatriate
Hermodorus, an aristocratic friend of Heraclitus'. His interpreta-
tion of the people's motives is most interesting, for it shows that

CHAPTER 2 I HERACLITUS II

since the earliest days of democracy. * They held : we do not
like anyone to excel among us ; and if someone is outstanding,
then let him be so elsewhere, and among others.' This hostility
towards democracy breaks through everywhere in the fragments :
c . . the mob fill their bellies like the beasts. . . They take the
bards and popular belief as their guides, unaware that the many
are mean and that only the few are noble. . . In Priene live.d
Bias, son of Tenthamas, whose opinion counts more than most.
He said : " Most men are wicked "... The mob does not
care, not even about the things they stumble upon ; nor can
they grasp a lesson though they think they do.' In the same
vein he says : * The law can demand, too, that the will of One
Man must be obeyed.' Another expression of Heraclitus' con-
servative and anti-democratic outlook is, incidentally, quite
acceptable to democrats in its wording, though not in its intention :
4 A people ought to fight for the laws of the city as if they were
its walls.'

But Heraclitus' fight for the ancient laws of his city was in
vain, and the transitoriness of all things impressed itself strongly
upon him. His theory of change gives expression to this feeling 5 :
c Everything is in flux ', he said ; and ' You cannot step twice
into the same river.' Disillusioned, he argued against the belief
that the existing social order would remain for ever : c One must
not act and talk like those reared with the narrow outlook " As
it has been handed down to us ".'

This emphasis on change, arid especially on change in social
life, is a noteworthy characteristic not only of Heraclitus' phil-
osophy but of historicism in general. That things, and even
kings, change, is a truth which needs to be impressed especially
upon those who take their social environment too much for
granted. So much is to be admitted. But in the Heraclitean
philosophy one of the less commendable characteristics of
historicism manifests itself, namely, an over-emphasis upon
change, combined with the complementary belief in an inexorable
law of destiny. Every process in the world develops according
to a definite law, its c measure ' 6 . Heraclitus visualizes this law
of destiny in an interesting way. It is inexorable and irresistible,
and to this extent it resembles our modern conception of natural
law as well as the conception of developmental laws of modern
historicists. But it differs from these conceptions in so far as it
is enforced by punishments, just as laws imposed by the state.

This failure! to distinguish between legal laws or norms on the

one hand and natural laws or regularities on the other is character-
istic of tribal tabooism : both kinds of law alike are treated as
magical, which makes a rational criticism of the man-made
taboos as inconceivable as an attempt to improve upon the
regularities of the natural world : 7 * All events proceed with
the necessity of fate. . . The sun will not outstep the measure
of his path ; but if he does, then the goddesses of Fate, the
handmaids of Justice, will know how to find him. . . The order
of the world, which is the same for all things, has not been made,
neither by a god nor by a man. It always was, is, and will be,
an eternally living fire, with a law that measures its flaring up
and a law that measures its dying down. . . In its advance,
the Fire will judge and convict everything.'

Combined with the historicist idea of a relentless destiny we
frequently find an element of mysticism. A critical analysis of
mysticism will be given in chapter 24. Here I wish only to
show the role of anti-rationalism and mysticism in Heraclitus'
philosophy 8 : ' Nature loves to hide ', he writes, and ' The
Lord who owns the oracle of Delphi neither reveals nor conceals,
but he shows his meaning through signs '. Heraclitus' contempt
of the more empirically minded scientists is typical of those who
adopt this attitude : 6 Who knows many things need not have
many brains ; for otherwise Hesiod and Pythagoras would have
had more, and also Xenophanes. . .' Along with this scorn of
scientists goes the mystical theory of an intuitive understanding
which is given to the chosen, to those who are awake, who have
the power to see, hear, and speak : c One must not act and talk
as if asleep. . . Those who are awake have One common world ;
those who are asleep, turn to their private worlds. . . They
are incapable both of listening and of talking. . . Even if they
do hear they are like the deaf. The saying applies to them :
They are present yet they are not present. . . One thing alone
is wisdom : to understand the thought which steers everything
through everything.' The world experienced in common by
those who are awake is the mystical unity, the oneness of all
things : * One must follow what is common to all. . . The
thought is common to all. . . All becomes One and One
becomes All. . . The One which alone is wisdom wishes and
does not wish to be called by the name of 2eus. . . It is the
thunderbolt which steer^ everything through everything.'

So much for the more general features of the Heraclitean
philosophy of universal change and hidden destiny.* From it

springs a theory of the driving force behind all change ; a theory
which exhibits its historicist character, by its emphasis upon the
importance of a c social dynamics ' as opposed to a * social
statics '. Heraclitus' dynamics of nature in general and especially
of social life confirms the view that his philosophy was inspired
by the social and political disturbances he had experienced. For
he declares that strife or war is the dynamic as well as the creative
principle of all change, and especially of all differences between
men. And being a typical historicist, he accepts the judgement
of history as a moral one 9 , holding that the outcome of war is
always just 10 : * War is the father and king of all things. It
proves some to be gods and others to be mere men, by turning
the latter into slaves and the former into masters, . . One must
know that strife is common to everything, and that war is justice,
and that all things develop through strife and by necessity/

But if war is just, if c the goddesses of Fate ' are at the same
time c the handmaids of Justice ', if history, or more precisely, if
success, i.e. success in war, is the criterion of merit, then the
standard of merit must itself be c in flux '. Heraclitus meets this
problem by his relativism, and by his doctrine of the identity of
opposites. This springs from his theory of change. A changing
thing must give up some property and acquire the opposite
property. It is not so much a thing as a process of transition
from one state to an opposite state, and thereby a unification of
the opposite states ll : ' Cold things become warm and warm
things become cold ; what is moist becomes dry and what is dry
becomes moist. . . Disease enables us to appreciate health. . .
Life and death, being awake and being asleep, youth and old
age, all this is identical ; for the one turns into the other and
the latter returns into the former. . . The path that leads up
and the path that leads down are identical. . . The divergent
agrees with itself : it is a harmony resulting from opposite tensions,
as in the bow, or in the lyre. . . The opposites belong to each
other, the best harmony results^ from discord, and everything
develops by strife. . . Good and bad are identical.'

But the ethical relativism expressed in the last fragment does
not prevent Heraclitus from developing upon the background
of his theory of the justice of war and the verdict of history a
tribalist and romantic ethic of Fame, Fate, and the superiority
of the Great Man, all strangely similar* to some very modern
ideas ia : ' Who falls fighting will be glorified by gods and by
men. . . ,The greater the fall the more glorious the fate. . .

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The best seek one thing above all others : eternal fame. . . One
man is worth more than ten thousand, if he is Great.'

It is surprising to find in these early fragments, dating from about 500 B.C., so much that is characteristic of modern anti-democratic and historicist tendencies. But apart from the fact that many of these ideas have, through the medium of Plato, become part of the main body of philosophic tradition, the similarity of doctrine can perhaps be to some extent explained by the similarity of social conditions at the different periods during which it arises. It seems as if historicist ideas easily become prominent in times of great social change. They appeared when Greek tribal life broke up, as well as when that of the Jews was shattered by the impact of the Babylonian conquest 1S . There can be little doubt, I believe, that Heraclitus 5 philosophy is an expression of a feeling of drift ; a feeling which seems to be a typical reaction to the dissolution of the ancient tribal forms of social life. In modern Europe, historicist Ideas were revived during the industrial revolution, and especially through the impact of the political revolutions in America and France 14 . It appears to be more than a mere coincidence that Hegel, who adopted so much of Heraclitus' thought and passed it on to all modern historicist movements, was a mouthpiece of the reaction against the French Revolution.

CHAPTER 3 : PLATO'S THEORY OF IDEAS

Plato lived in a period of wars and of political strife which was, for all we know, even more severe than that which had troubled Heraclitus. Before his time, the breakdown of the tribal life of the Greeks had led in Athens, his native city, to a period of tyranny, and later to the establishment of a democracy which tried jealously to guard itself against any attempts to reintroduce either a tyranny or an oligarchy, i.e. a rule of the leading aristocratic families l . During Plato's youth, democratic Athens was involved in a deadly war against Sparta, the leading city-state of the Peloponnese, which had preserved many of the laws and customs of the ancient tribal aristocracy. The Peloponnesian war lasted, with an interruption, for twenty-eight years. (In chapter 10, where the historical background is reviewed in more detail, it will be shown that the war did not end with the fall of Athens in 404 B.C., as is sometimes asserted 2 .) Plato was born during the war, and he was about twenty-four when it ended. It brought terrible epidemics, and, in its last year, famine, the fall of the city of Athens, civil war, and a rule of terror, usually called the rule of the Thirty Tyrants ; these were led by two of Plato's uncles, who both lost their lives in the course of the civil war. Even the peace and the re-establishment of the democracy meant no respite for Plato. His beloved teacher Socrates, whom he later made the main speaker of most of his dialogues, was tried and executed. Plato himself seems to have been in danger ; together with other companions of Socrates, he left Athens.

Later, on a visit to Sicily, Plato became entangled in the
political intrigues which were spun at the court of Dionysius I,
tyrant of Syracuse, and even after his return to Athens and the
foundation of the Academy, Plato continued along with some
of his pupils to take an active part in the conspiracies and
revolutions 3 that constituted Syracusan politics.

This brief outline of political events may help to explain why,
Plato, like Heraclitus, suffered deeply from the instability and]
the lack of security in the political life of his time. Like
Heraclitus, Plato was of royal blood ; at> least, the tradition
claims that his father's family traced itf descent from Codrus,
the last of the tribal kings of Attica 4 . Plato was very proud of

'5

his mother's family which, as he explains in one of his last
dialogues, the Timaeus, was related to that of Solon, the lawgiver
of Athens. To it belonged also his uncles, Critias and Charmides^
the leading men of the Thirty Tyrants. With such a family
tradition, Plato could be expected to take a deep interest in
public affairs ; and indeed, most of his works 5 confirm this
expectation. He himself relates that he was * from the beginning
most anxious for political activity ', but that he was deterred by
the stirring experiences of his youth. ' Seeing that everything
swayed and shifted without plan, I became desperate/ From
the feeling that society, and indeed c everything ', was in flux,
arose the fundamental impulse of his philosophy as well as of
the philosophy of Heraclitus ; and as his historicist predecessor
had done, so Plato summed up his social experience by proffering
a law of historical development. According to this law, which
will be more fully discussed in the next chapter, social change
was degeneration. Even though in some of Plato's works there is a
suggestion of a cyclic development, leading up again after the
lowest point of extreme evil was passed, the main trend is one of
decay. Our own cosmic period, more particularly, is for a long
time to come (its length is 18,000 years) a period of deterioration,
and this period is the only one that plays any role in Plato's
philosophy of history. The other part of the cycle, the period
of the rise, is nowhere clearly referred to, and the few vague
hints given are not sufficient to show whether Plato really believed
in it. In what follows, I shall therefore confine my analysis to
the main doctrine of Plato's historicism, namely, to the doctrine
that the law of historical development is one of degeneration or
decay 6 .

So far we have seen only similarities between Plato and
Heraclitus. But there is an important difference. Plato believed
in the possibility of breaking through this fatal circle, and of

putting an end to the process of decay. He believed in the possibility of arresting all political change. Accordingly, this becomes the aim he strives for *. He tries to realize it by establishing a state which is free from the evils of all other states, because it does not change. It is the best, the arrested state.

Important as this difference is, it gives rise to a further point of similarity between Plato and Heraclitus. Heraclitus had generalized his experience of social flux by extending it to the world of * all things ', and Plato, I have hinted, did the same. But Plato also extended his belief in a perfect state tlytt does not

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decay to the realm of * all things '. He believed that to every kind of ordinary or decaying things, there corresponds also a perfect thing that does not decay. This belief in perfect and unchanging things, usually called the Theory of Forms or Ideas 8 , became the central doctrine of his philosophy.

Plato's belief that it is possible for us to break the iron law of destiny and to avoid decay by arresting all change, shows that his historicist tendencies had definite limitations. A radical and fully developed historicism does not admit that man, by any effort, can alter the laws of historical destiny even after he has discovered them. He cannot work against them, since all his plans and actions are means by which the inexorable laws of development realize his historical destiny, just as Oedipus met his fate because of the prophecy and the measures taken by his father for avoiding it, and not in spite of them. In order to gain a better understanding of this radical historicist attitude, and to analyse the opposite tendency inherent in Plato's belief that he could influence fate, I shall contrast historicism with a diametric- ally opposite approach which may be called the attitude of social engineering 9 .

The social engineer does not ask any questions about historical tendencies or the destiny of man. He believes that man is the master of his own destiny, and that in accordance with our aims, we can influence or change the history of man just as we have changed the face of the earth. He does not believe that these ends are imposed upon us by our historical background or by the trends of history, but rather that they are freely created by ourselves, just as we create new thoughts or new works of art or new houses or new machinery. As opposed to the historicist who believes that intelligent political action is possible only if the future course of history is first determined, the social engineer! believes that the scientific basis of politics would be very different ; it would be the factual information necessary for the construction or alteration of social institutions, in accordance with our wishes and aims. Such a science would have to tell us what steps we

must take if we wish, for instance, to avoid depressions, or else
to produce depressions ; or if we wish to make the distribution
of wealth more even, or less even. In other words, the social
engineer conceives as the scientific basis of politics something
like a social technology (Plato, as we shall see, compares it with
the scientific background of medicine), as opposed to the historicist
who understands it as a science of immutable historical tendencies.

1 8 THE MYTH OF DESTINY

From what I have said about the attitude of the social
engineer, it must not be inferred that there are no important
differences within the camp of the social engineers. One such
difference between what I call ' piecemeal social engineering '
and c Utopian social engineering ', will be the main theme of
chapter 9, where I shall give my reasons 10 for advocating the
former and rejecting the latter. But for the time being, I am
concerned only with the opposition between historicism and
social engineering. This opposition can perhaps be further
clarified if we consider the attitudes taken up by the historicist
and by the social engineer towards social institutions.

The historicist is inclined to look upon social institutions
mainly from the point of view of their history, i.e. their origin,!
their development, and their present and future significance.!
He may perhaps insist that their origin is due to a definite plan
or design and to the pursuit of definite ends, either human or
divine ; or he may assert that they are not designed to serve any
clearly conceived ends, but are rather the immediate expression
of certain instincts and passions ; or he may assert that they
have once served as means to definite ends, but that they have
lost this character. The social engineer and technologist, on
the other hand, will hardly take much interest in the origin of
institutions, or in the original intentions of their founders.
Rather, he will put his problem like this. If such and such are
our aims, is this institution well designed and organized to serve
them ? As an example we may consider the institution of
insurance. The social engineer or technologist will not worry
much about the question whether insurance originated as a
profit-seeking business ; or whether its historical mission is to
serve the common weal. But he may offer a criticism of certain
institutions of insurances, showing, perhaps, how to increase their
profits, or, which is a very different thing, how to increase the
benefit they render to the public ; and he will suggest ways in
which they could be made more efficient in serving the one end
or the other. As another example of a social institution, we
may consider a police force. Some historicists may describe it
as an instrument for the protection of freedom and security,
others as an instrument of class rule and oppression. The social
engineer or technologist, however, would perhaps suggest
measures that would irfoke it a suitable instrument for the protec-

tion of freedom and security, and he might also devise measures
by which it could be turned into a powerful weapon for class

rule. (In his function as a citizen who has certain ends in
which he believes, he may demand that these ends, and the
appropriate measures, should be adopted. But as a technologist,
he would carefully distinguish between the question of the ends
and their choice and questions concerning the facts, i.e. the
social effects of any measure which might be taken n .)

Speaking more generally, we can say that the engineer or the
technologist approaches institutions rationally as means that servd
certain ends, and that as a technologist he judges them wholly
according to their appropriateness, efficiency, simplicity, etc.
The historicist, on the other hand, would rather attempt to find
out the * true role ' played by these institutions in the develop-
ment of history, evaluating them, for instance, as * willed by
God ', or c willed by Fate ', or c serving important historical
trends ', etc.

The two attitudes, historicism and social engineering, occur
sometimes in rather typical combinations. The earliest and
probably the most influential example of these is the social and
political philosophy of Plato. It combines, as it were, some
fairly obvious technological elements in the foregrojund^with ^
background dbminatccl by an ^labo^e^display of_jypk:ally
InstoricistT features; The""C"ofnBmation is representative oTquife
a number of socTal and political philosophers who produced what
have been later described as Utopian systems. All these systems
recommend some kind of social engineering, since they demand
the adoption of certain institutional means, though not always
very realistic ones, for the achievement of their ends. But when
we proceed to a consideration of these ends, then we frequently
find that they are determined by historicism. Plato's political
ends, especially, depend to a considerable extent on his historicist
doctrines. First, it is his aim to escape the Heraclitean flux,
manifested in social revolution and historical decay. Secondly,
he believes that this can be done by establishing a state which
is so perfect that it does not participate in the general trend of
historical development. Thirdly, he believes that the model or
original of his perfect state can be found in the distant past, in
the dawn of history ; for if the world decays in time, then we
must find increasing perfection the further we go back into
the past. The perfect state is something like the first ancestor,
the primogenitor, of the later states, which are, as it were^ the
degenerate offspring of this perfect, or best, or c ideal ' state ia ; an
ideal state which is not a mere phantasm, nor a dream, but

which is in its stability more real indeed than all those decaying
societies which are in flux, and liable to pass away at any moment.

Thus even Plato's political end, the best state, is largely
dependent on his historicism ; and what is true of his philosophy
of the state can be extended, as already indicated, to his general
philosophy of * all things '.

The things in flux, the degenerate and decaying things, are
(like the state) the offspring, the children, as it were, of perfect
things. And like children, they are copies of their original
primogenitors. The father or original of a thing in flux is what
Plato calls its ' Form ' or its ' Pattern ' or its c Idea '. As before,
we must insist that the Form or Idea, in spite of its name, is no

* idea in our mind * ; it is not a phantasm, nor a dream, but a
real thing. It is, indeed, more real than all the ordinary things
which are in flux, and which, in spite of their apparent solidity,
are doomed to decay ; for the Form or Idea is a thing that is
perfect, and does not perish.

The Forms or Ideas must not be thought to dwell, like
perishable things, in space and time. They are outside space,
and also outside time (because they are eternal). But they are
in contact with space and time ; for since they are the primo-
genitors of the things which develop and decay in space and time,
they must have been in contact with space, at the beginning of
time. Since they are not with us in our space and time, they
cannot be perceived by our senses, as can the ordinary changing
things which interact with our senses and are therefore called

* sensible things *. Those sensible things which are copies or
children of the same original, resemble not only this originalj
their Form or Idea, but also one another, as do children of the
same family ; and as children are called by the name of their
father, so are the sensible things, which bear the name of their
Forms or Ideas ; ' They are all called after them ', as Aristotle
says 1S .

This comparison between the Form or Idea of a class of
sensible things and the father of a family of children i$ developed
by Plato in the Timaeus, one of his latest dialogues. It is in
close agreement 14 with much of his earlier writing J on which it
throws considerable light. But in the Timaeus, Plato goes one
step beyond his earlier teaching when he represents the contact
of the Form or Idea With the world of space and time by an
extension of his simile. He describes the abstract * space ' in
which the sensible things move (originally the space or gap

between heaven and earth) as a receptacle, and compares it with
the mother of things, in which at the beginning of time the
sensible things are created by the Forms which stamp or impress
themselves upon pure space, and thereby give the offspring their
shape. c We must conceive ', writes Plato, c three kinds of
things : first, those which undergo generation ; secondly, that
in which generation takes place, and thirdly, the model in whose
likeness the generated things are born. And we may compare
the receiving principle to a mother, and the model to a father,
and their product to a child/ And he goes on to describe first
the fathers, the unchanging Forms or Ideas : * There is first the
unchanging Form, uncreated and indestructible, . . invisible and
imperceptible by any sense, and which can be contemplated only
by pure thought.' To any single one of these Forms or Ideas
belongs its offspring or race of sensible things, ' another kind of
things, bearing the name of their Form and resembling it, but
perceptible to sense, created, always in flux, generated in a place
and again vanishing from that place, and apprehended by opinion
based upon perception '. And the abstract space which is
likened to the mother, is described thus : * There is a third kind,
which is space, and is eternal, and cannot be destroyed, arid
which provides a home for all generated things. . .' 15

It may contribute to the understanding of Plato's theory of
Forms or Ideas if we compare it with certain Greek religious
beliefs. As in many primitive religions, some at least of the
Greek gods are nothing but idealized tribal primogenitors and
heroes. Accordingly, certain tribes and families traced their
ancestry to one or other of the gods. (Plato's own family is
reported to have traced its descent from the god Poseidon ie .)
We have only to consider that these gods are immortal or eternal,
and perfect (or very nearly so) while men are involved in the
flux of all things, and subject to decay (which indeed is the
ultimate destiny of every human individual), in order to see that
these gods are related to men in tfie same way as Plato's Forms
or Ideas are related to those sensible things which are their
copies 17 (or his perfect state to the various states now existing).
There is, however, an important difference between Greek
mythology and Plato's Theory of Forms or Ideas. While the
Greek venerated many gods as the ancestors of various tribes or
families, the Theory of Ideas demands tfiae there should be only
one Form or Idea of man (or perhaps one Form or Idea of the
Greek man, and one each of the various Barbarian races 18) ;

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for it is one of the central doctrines of the Theory of Forms that
there is only one Form of every * race ' or c kind ' of things. The

uniqueness of the Form which corresponds to the uniqueness of
the primogenitor is demanded if the theory is to perform one of
its most important functions, namely, to explain the similarity
of sensible things, by proposing that the similar things are copies
or imprints of one Form. Thus if there were two equal or similar
Forms, their similarity would force us to assume that they are
both copies of a third original, which therefore would be the only
true and single Form. Or, as Plato puts it in the Timaeus :
c The resemblance would thus be explained, more precisely, not
as one between these two things, but in reference to that superior
thing which is their prototype.' 10 In the Republic, which is
earlier than the Timaeus, Plato had explained his point even
more clearly, using as his example the j essential bed ', i.e. the
Form or Idea of a bed : c God . . has made one essential bed,
and only one ; two or more he did not produce, and never will. . .
For . . even if God were to make two, and no more, then another
would be brought to light, namely the Form exhibited by those
two ; this, and not those two, would then be the essential bed/ 20

This argument shows that the Forms or Ideas provide Plato
not only with an origin or starting point for all developments in
space and time (and especially for human history) but also with
an explanation of the similarities between sensible things of the
same kind. If things are similar because of some property
which they share, for instance, r whiteness, or hardness, or goodness,
then this property must be one and the same in all of them ;
otherwise it would not make them similar. According to Plato,
they all participate in the one Form or Idea of whiteness, if they
are white ; of hardness, if they are hard. They participate in
the sense in which children participate in their father's possessions
and gifts ; just as the many particular reproductions of an etching
which are all impressions from one and the same plate, and
hence similar to one another^ may participate in the beauty of
the original.

The fact that this theory is designed to explain the similarities
in sensible things does not seem at first sight to be in any way
connected with historicism. But it is ; and as Aristotle tells us,
it was just this connection which induced Plato to develop the
Theory of Ideas. I* stall attempt to give an outline of this
development, using Aristotle's account together with some
indications in Plato's own writings.

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If all things are in continuous flux, then it is impossible to
say anything definite about them. We can have no real know-
ledge of them, but, at the best, vague and delusive ' opinions '.
This point, as we know from Plato and Aristotle 21 , worried
many followers of Heraclitus. Parmenides, one of Plato's
predecessors who influenced him greatly, had taught that the

pure knowledge of reason, as opposed to the delusive opinion of
experience, could have as its object only a world which did not
change, and that the pure knowledge of reason did in fact reveal
such a world. But the unchanging and undivided reality which
Parmenides thought he had discovered behind the world of
perishable things 22 , was entirely unrelated to this world in which
we live and die. It was therefore incapable of explaining it.

With this, Plato could not be satisfied. Much as he disliked
and despised this empirical world of flux, he was, at bottom, most
deeply interested in it. He wanted to unveil the secret of its
decay, of its violent changes, and of its unhappiness. He hoped
to discover the means of its salvation. He was interested in
Parmenides' doctrine of an unchanging, real, and perfect world
behind this ghostly world in which he suffered, but it did not
solve his problems as long as it remained unrelated to the world
of sensible things. What he was looking for was knowledge, not
opinion ; the pure rational knowledge of a world that does not
change ; but, at the same time, knowledge that could be used to
investigate this changing world, and especially, this changing
society, political change, with its strange historical laws. Plato
aimed at discovering the secret of the royal knowledge of politics,
of the art of ruling men.

But an exact science of politics seemed as impossible as any
exact knowledge of a world in flux ; there were no fixed objects
in the political field. How could one discuss any political
questions when the meaning of words like ' government ' or
c state ' or * city ' changed with every new phase in the historical
development ? Political theory must have seemed to Plato in
his Heraclitean period to be just as elusive, fluctuating, and
unfathomable as political practice.

In this situation Plato obtained, as Aristotle tells us, a most
important hint from Socrates. Socrates was interested in ethical
matters ; he was an ethical reformer, a moralist who pestered all
kinds of people, forcing them to think, to explain, and to account
for the principles of their actions. He used to question them and
was not easily satisfied by their answers. The typical reply, we

act so, because it is ' wise ' to act in this, way (or ' efficient ', or
* just ', or c pious *, etc.) only incited him to continue his questions
by asking what is wisdom ; or efficiency ; or justice ; or piety.
So he discussed, for instance, the wisdom displayed in various
trades and professions, in order to find out what is common to
all these various and changing c wise ' ways of behaviour, and so
to find out what * wisdom ' really means, or (using Aristotle's
way of putting it) what its essence is. * It was natural ', says
Aristotle, * that Socrates should search for the essence ' 23 , i.e.

for the real, the unchanging or essential meaning of the terms.
' In this connection he became the first to raise the problem of
universal definitions. 3

These attempts of Socrates to discuss ethical terms like
'justice ' or * modesty ' or * piety ' have been rightly compared
with modern discussions on Liberty (by Mill 24 , for instance), or
on Authority, or on the Individual and Society (by Catlin, for
instance). There is no need to assume that Socrates, in his
search for the unchanging or essential meaning of such terms,
personified them, or that he treated them like things. Aristotle's
report at least suggests that he did not, and that it was Plato
who developed Socrates' method of searching for the meaning
or essence into a method of determining the real nature, the
Form or Idea of a thing. Plato retained ' the Heraclitean
doctrines that all sensible things are ever in a state of flux, and
that there is no knowledge about them ', but found in Socrates'
method a way out of these difficulties. Though there * could be
no definition of any sensible thing, as they were always changing ',
there could be definitions and true knowledge of things of a
different kind. ' If knowledge or thought were to have an object,
there would have to be some different, some unchanging entities,
apart from those which are sensible ', says Aristotle 25 , and he
reports of Plato that ' things of this other sort, then, he called
Forms or Ideas, and the sensible things, he said, were distinct
from them, and all called ^ifter them. And the many things
which have the same name as a certain Form or Idea exist by
participating in it/

This account of Aristotle's corresponds exactly to Plato's own
arguments proffered in the Timaeus * 8 , and it shows that Plato's
fundamental problem was to find a scientific method of dealing
with sensible things. He wanted to obtain purely rational
knowledge, and not merely opinion ; and since pure knowledge
of sensible things could not be obtained, he insisted, as mentioned

before, on obtaining at least such pure knowledge as was in some
way related, and applicable, to sensible things. Knowledge of
the Forms or Ideas fulfilled this demand, since the Form was
related to its sensible things like a father to his children who are
under age. The Form was the accountable representative of the
sensible things, and could therefore be consulted in important
questions concerning the world of flux.

According to our analysis, the theory of Forms or Ideas has
at least three different functions in Plato's philosophy, (i) It
is an important methodological device, for it makes possible pure
scientific knowledge, and even knowledge which could be applied
to the world of changing things of which we cannot immediately

obtain any knowledge, but only opinion. Thus it becomes
possible to enquire into the problems of a changing society, and
to build up a political science. (2) It provides the clue to a
theory of change and decay, to a theory of generation and de-
generation, and especially, the clue to history. (3) It opens a
way, in the social realm, towards some kind of social engineering ;
and it makes possible the forging of instruments for arresting
social change, since it suggests designing a ' best state ' which so
closely resembles the Form or Idea of a state that it cannot decay.

Problem (2), the theory of change and of history, will be
dealt with in the next two chapters, 4 and 5, where Plato's
descriptive sociology is treated, i.e. his description and explana-
tion of the changing social world in which he lived. Problem
(3), the arresting of social change, will be dealt with in chapters
6 to 9, treating Plato's political programme. Problem (i), that
of Plato's methodology, has with the help of Aristotle's account
of the history of Plato's theory been briefly outlined in the present
chapter. To this discussion, I wish to add here a few more
remarks.

I use the name methodological essentiaUsm to characterize the
view, held by Plato and many of Tns followers, that it is the task
of pure knowledge or science to discover and to describe the
true nature of things, i.e. their hidden reality or essence. It
was Plato's peculiar belief that the essence of sensible things can
be found in their primogenitors or Forms. But many of the
later methodological essentialists, for instance, Aristotle, did not
altogether follow him in this, although they all agreed with him
in determining the task of pure knowledge 'as the discovery of
the hidden nature or Form or essence of things. All these
methodological essentialists also agreed with Plato in maintaining
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that these essences may be discovered and discerned with the
help of intellectual intuition ; that every essence has a name
proper to it, the name after which the sensible things are
called ; and that it may be described in words. And a descrip-
tion of the essence of a thing they all called a definition. Accord-
ing to methodological essentialism, there can be three ways of
knowing a thing : * I mean that we can know its unchanging
reality or essence ; and that we can know the definition of the
essence ; and that we can know its name. Accordingly, two
questions may be formulated about any real thing. . . : A person
may give the name and ask for the definition ; or he may give
the definition and ask for the name.' As an example of this
method, Plato uses the essence of c even ' (as opposed to c odd ') :
' Number . . may be a thing capable of division into equal
parts. If it is so divisible, number is named " even " ; and the

definition of the name " even " is "a number divisible into
equal parts "... And when we are given the name and asked
about the definition, . or when we are given the definition and
asked about the name, we speak, in both cases, of one and the
same essence, whether we call it now " even " or "a number
divisible into equal parts 5 V After this example, Plato proceeds
to apply this method to a ' proof concerning the real nature of
the soul, about which we shall hear more later 27 .

Methodological essentialism, i.e. the theory that it is the aim
of science to reveal essences and to describe them by means of
definitions, can be better understood when contrasted with its
opposite, methodological nominalism. Instead of aiming at finding
out what a thing really is, and at defining its true nature, methodo-
logical nominalism aims at describing how a thing behaves, and
especially, whether there are any regularities in its behaviour.
In other words, methodological nominalism sees the aim of science
in the description of the things and events of our experience,
and in an * explanation ' of these events, i.e. their description
with the help of universal laws 28 . And it sees in our language,
and especially in the rules which distinguish properly constructed
sentences and inferences from a mere heap of words, the great
instrument of scientific description 29 ; words it considers rather
as subsidiary tools for this task, and not as names of essences.
The methodological nominalist will never think that a 'question
like ' What is energy ?, ' or * What is movement ? ' or * What is
an atom ? ' is an important question for physics ; but he will
consider important a question like : ' How can the energy of

the sun be made useful ? ' or c How does a planet move ? ' or
c Under what condition does an atom radiate light ? ' And to
those philosophers who tell him that before having answered
the c what ' question he cannot hope to give exact answers to
any of the c how ' questions, he will reply, if at all, by pointing
out that he much prefers that modest degree of exactness which
he can achieve by his methods to the pretentious muddle which
they have achieved by theirs.

As indicated by our example, methodological nominalism is
nowadays fairly generally accepted in the natural sciences. The
problems of the social sciences, on the other hand, are still for
the most part treated by essentialist methods. This is, in my
opinion, one of the main reasons for their backwardness. But
many who have noticed this situation 30 judge it differently.
They believe that the difference in method is necessary, and that
it reflects an 6 essential ' difference between the * natures ' of these
two fields of research.

The arguments usually offered in support of this view

emphasize the importance of change in society, and exhibit other
features of historicism. The physicist, so runs a typical argument,
deals with objects like energy or atoms which, though changing,
retain a certain degree of constancy. He can describe the
changes encountered by these relatively unchanging entities, and
does not have to construct or detect essences or Forms or similar
unchanging entities in order to obtain something permanent of
which he can make definite pronouncements. The social
scientist, however, is in a very different position. His whole
field of interest is changing. There are no permanent entities in
the social realm where everything is under the sway of historical
flux. How, for instance, can we study government ? How could
we identify it in the diversity of governmental institutions, found
in different states at different historical periods, without assuming
that they have something essentially in common ? We call an
institution a government if we think that it is essentially a govern-
ment, i.e. if it complies with the intuition of what a government
is, an intuition which we can formulate in a definition. The
same would hold good for other sociological entities, such as
* civilization '. We have to grasp their essence, and to lay it
down in the form of a definition.

These modern arguments are, I think, very similar to those
Deported above which, according to Aristotle, led Plato to his
doctrine of Forms or Ideas. The only difference is that Plato

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(who did not accept the atomic theory and knew nothing about
energy) applied his doctrine to the realm of physics also, and
thus to the world as a whole. We have here an indication of the
fact that in the social sciences, a discussion of Plato's methods
may be topical even to-day.

Before proceeding to Plato's sociology and to the use he made
of his methodological essentialism in that field, I wish to make it
quite clear that I am confining my treatment of Plato to his
historicism, and to his * best state '. I must therefore warn the
reader not to expect a representation of the whole of Plato's
philosophy, or what may be called a c fair and just ' treatment
of Platonism. My attitude towards historicism is one of frank
hostility, based upon the conviction that historicism is futile, and
worse than that. My survey of the historicist features in
Platonism is therefore strongly critical. Although I admire much
in Plato, especially those parts which I believe to be Socratic,
I do not think it my task to add to the countless tributes to his
genius. I am, rather, bent on destroying what is in my opinion
most mischievous in this philosophy. This is Plato's political
totalitarianism, the criticism of which is here, I believe, carried
considerably further than by those other recent critics 31 who
first pointed out the distinctly fascist flavour of Plato's politics.

CHAPTER 4 : CHANGE AND REST

Plato was one of the first social scientists and undoubtedly
by far the most influential. In the sense in which the term
e sociology ' was understood by Comte, Mill, and Spencer, he
was a sociologist ; that is to say, he successfully applied his
ideaJisLjnethod to an Analysis of the social life ot man, andT of
the laws oTits development as well as the laws and conditions
of its stability. In spite of Plato's great influence, this side of
his teaching has been little noticed. This seems to be due to
two factors. First of all, much of Plato's sociology is presented
by him in such close connection with his ethical and political
demands that the descriptive elements have been largely over-
looked. Secondly, many of his thoughts were so far taken for
granted that they were simply absorbed unconsciously and
therefore uncritically. It is mainly in this way that his
sociological theories became so influential.

Plato's sociology is an ingenious blend of speculation with
acute observation of facts. Its speculative setting is, of course,
the theory of Forms and of universal flux and decay, of generation
and degeneration. But on this idealist foundation Plato con-
structs an astonishingly realistic theory of society, capable of
explaining the main trends in the historical development of the
Greek city-states as well as the social and political forces at
work in his own day.

The speculative or metaphysical setting of Plato's theory of
social change has already been sketched. It is the w&rld of
unchanging Forms or Ideas, of which the world of changing
things in space and time is the offspring. The Forms or Ideas
are not only unchanging, indestructible, and incorruptible, but
also perfect, true, real, and good ; in fact, e good 3 is once, in
the Republic 1 , explained as c everything that preserves ', and
' evil ' as * everything that destroys or corrupts '. The perfect
and good Forms or Ideas are prior to the copies, the sensible
things, and they are something like primogenitors or starting
points 2 of all the changes in the world of flux. This view is
used for evaluating the general trend and main direction of all

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changes in the world of sensible things. For if the starting
point of all change is perfect and good, then change can only
be a movement that leads away from the perfect and good ;
it must be directed towards the imperfect and the evil, towards

corruption.

This theory can be developed in detail. The more closely
a sensible thing resembles its Form or Idea, the less corruptible
it must be, since the Forms themselves are incorruptible. But
sensible things are not perfect copies ; indeed, no copy can be
perfect, since it is only an imitation of the true reality, only
appearance and illusion, not the truth. Accordingly, no sensible
things resemble their Forms sufficiently closely to be unchange-
able. * Only the most divine things remain unchanged ' 3 ,
says Plato. A sensible thing, if it is a good copy, may change
only very little at first. But every change, however small, must
make it different from what it has been before, and must thus
make it less perfect by reducing its resemblance to its Form.
In this way, the thing becomes more changeable with every
change, and more corruptible, since it becomes further removed
from its Form, which is its * cause of immobility and of being
at rest ', as Aristotle says. Thus we can understand why Plato
teaches in the Laws, the last of his great dialogues, that c any
change whatever, with the possible exception of the change of
an evil thing, is the most terrible danger that can be imagined ',
adding for the sake of emphasis : ' And this is true of all things,
except the evil ones, as mentioned before.' In brief, Plato
teaches that change is evil, and rest divine.

We see now that Plato's theory of Forms or Ideas implies
a certain trend in the development of the world in flux. It
leads to the law that the corruptibility of all things in that world
must continually increase. It is not so much a rigid law of
universally increasing corruption, but rather a law of increasing
corruptibility ; that is to say, the danger or the likelihood of
corruption increases, but exceptional developments in the other
direction are not excluded. Thus it is possible, as the last
quotation indicates, that very evil things, for instance a very
evil city, may be improved by change. (In order that such
an improvement should be of any value, we would have to
try to make it permanent, i.e. to arrest all further change.)

In full accordance with this general theory is Plato's story,
in the Timaeus, of the origin of species. According to this story,
man, the highest of animals, is generated by the god^ ; the other

species originate from him by a process of corruption and
degeneration. First, certain men degenerate into women.
Later, step by step, they degenerate into the lower animals.
Birds, we hear, came into being through the transformation of
harmless but too easy-going people who would trust their senses
too much ; ' land animals came from' men who had no interest
in philosophy ' ; and fishes, including shell-fish, c degenerated

from the most foolish, stupid, and . . unworthy ' of all men 4 .

It is clear that this theory can be applied to human society, and to its history. It then explains Hesiod's 5 pessimistic developmental law, the law of historical decay. If we are to believe Aristotle's report outlined in the last chapter, then the theory of Forms or Ideas was originally introduced in order to meet a methodological demand, the demand for pure or rational knowledge which is impossible in the case of sensible things in flux. We now see that the theory does more than that. Over and above meeting these methodological demands, it explains the general direction of the flux of all sensible things, and thereby the historical tendency to degenerate shown by man and human society. (And it docs still more ; as we shall see in chapter 6, the theory of Forms determines the trend of Plato's political demands also, and even the means for their realization.) If, as I believe, the philosophies of Plato as well as Heraclitus sprang from their social experience, especially from the experience of class war and from the abject feeling that their social world was going to pieces, then we can understand why the theory of Forms came to play such an important part in Plato's philosophy when he found that it was capable of explaining the trend towards degeneration. He must have welcomed it as the solution of a most mystifying riddle. While Heraclitus had been unable to pass a direct ethical condemnation upon the trend of the political development, Plato found, in his theory of Forms, the theoretical basis for a pessimistic judgement in Hesiod's vein.

But Plato's greatness as a sociologist does not lie in his general and abstract speculations about the law of social decay. It lies rather in the wealth and detail of his observations, and in the amazing acuteness of his sociological, intuition. He saw things which not only had not been seen before him, but which were rediscovered only in our own tinte. As an example I may mention his theory of the primitive beginnings of society, of tribal patriarchy, and, in general, his attempt to outline the

typical periods in the development of social life. Another example is Plato's sociological and economic historicism, his emphasis on the economic background of political life and historical developments ; a theory revived by Marx under the name ' historical materialism '. A third example is Plato's m6st interesting law of political revolutions, according to which all revolutions presuppose a disunited ruling class ; a law which forms the basis of his analysis of the means of arresting political change and creating social equilibrium, and which has been recently rediscovered by the theoreticians of totalitarianism, especially by Pareto.

I shall now proceed to a more detailed discussion of these
points, especially the third, the theory of revolution and of
equilibrium.

The dialogues in which Plato discusses these questions are,
in chronological order, the Republic, a dialogue of much later
date called the Statesman (or the Politicus), and the Laws, the
latest and longest of his works. In spite of certain minor
differences, there is much agreement between these dialogues,
which are in some respects parallel, in others complementary
to one another. The Laws 6 , for instance, present the story of
the decline and fall of human society as an account of Greek
pre-history merging without any break into history ; while the
parallel passages of the Republic give, in a more abstract way,
a systematic outline of the development of government ; the
Statesman, still more abstract, gives a logical classification of
types of government, with only a few allusions to historical
events. Similarly, the Laws formulate the historicist aspect of
the investigation more clearly than any of the other dialogue^
' What is the archetype or origin of a state ? ' asks Plato there,
linking this question with the other : * Can the evolution of a
state change in both directions, towards the good as well as
towards the evil ? ' But within the sociological doctrines, the
only major difference appears to be due to a purely speculative
difficulty which seems to have worried Plato. Assuming as the
starting point of the development a perfect and therefore incor-
ruptible state, he found it difficult to explain the first change,
the Fall of Man, as it were, which sets everything going 7 . We
shall hear, in the next chapter, of Plato's attempt to solve this
problem ; but first I $hall give a general survey of his theory
of social development.

According to the Republic, the original or primitive form of

society, and at the same time, the one that resembles the Form
or Idea of a state most closely, the ' best state ', is a kingship
of the wisest and most godlike of men. This ideal state is so
near perfection that it is hard to understand how it can ever
change. Still, a change does take place ; and with it enters
Heraclitus' strife, the driving force of all movement. According
to Plato, internal strife, class war, fomented by self-interest andi
especially material or economic self-interest, is the main forcqf
of ' social dynamics '. The Marxian formula * The history of
all hitherto existing societies is a history of class struggle 9 8 , fits
Plato's historicism nearly as well as that of Marx. The four
most conspicuous periods or ' landmarks in the history of political
degeneration ', and, at the same time, ' the most important . .
varieties of existing states ' 9 , are described by Plato in the

following order. First after the perfect state comes * timarchy '
or * timocracy ', the rule of the noble who seek honour and
fame ; secondly, oligarchy, the rule of the rich families ; ' next
in order, democracy is born ', the rule of liberty which means
lawlessness, and last comes e tyranny . . the fourth and final
sickness of the city ' 10 .

As can be seen from the last remark, Plato looks upon history,
which to him is a history of social decay, as if it were the history
of an illness ; the patient is society ; and, as we shall see later,
the statesman ought to be a physician (and vice versa). Just
as the description of the typical course of an illness is not always
applicable to every individual patient, so is Plato's historical
theory of social decay not intended to apply to the development
of every individual city. But it is intended to describe both the
original course of development by which the main forms of
constitutional decay were first generated, and the typical course
of social change 11 . We see that Plato aimed at setting out a
system of historical periods governed by developmental law,
i.e. at a historicist theory of society ; an attempt which was
revived by Rousseau, and was made fashionable by Comte and
Mill, and by Hegel and Marx. And considering the historical
evidence then available, Plato's system of historical periods was
just as good as that of any of these modern historicists. (The
main difference lies in the evaluation of the course taken by
history. While the aristocrat Plato hated the development he
described, these modern authors loved it,*bfelieving as they did
in a law of historical progress.)

Before discussing Plato's perfect state in any detail, I shall

give a brief sketch of the role played by economic motives and
the class struggle in the process of transition between the four
decaying forms of the state. The first form into which the
perfect state degenerates, timocracy, the rule of the ambitious
noblemen, is said to be in nearly all respects similar to the
perfect state itself. It is important to note that Plato identifies
this best and oldest among the existing states with the Dorian
constitution of Sparta and Crete, and that these two tribal
aristocracies did indeed represent the oldest existing form of
political life within Greece. Most of Plato's excellent description
of their institutions is given in his description of the best or
perfect state, to which timocracy is so similar. The main
difference is that the latter contains an element of instability ;
the once united patriarchal ruling class is now disunited, and
it is this disunity which leads to the next step, to its degeneration
into oligarchy. Disunion is brought about by ambition. ' First ',
says Plato, speaking of the young timocrat, ' he hears his mother
complaining that her husband is not one of the rulers . .' 12

Thus he becomes ambitious and longs for distinction. But
decisive in bringing about the next change are competitive and
acquisitive social tendencies. * We must describe ', says Plato,
* how timocracy changes into oligarchy . . Even a blind man
must see how it changes . . It is the treasure house that ruins
this constitution* They ' (the timocrats) ' begin by creating
opportunities for showing off and spending money, and to this
end they twist the laws, and they and their wives disobey
them . . ; and they try to outrival one another.' In this Way
arises the first class conflict ; that between virtue and money,
or between the old-established ways of feudal simplicity and the
new ways of wealth. The transition to oligarchy is completed
when the rich establish a law that c disqualifies from public
office all those whose means do not reach the stipulated amount.
This change is imposed by force of arms, should threats and
blackmail not succeed . .' 9

With the establishment of the oligarchy, a state of potential
civil war between the oligarchs and the poorer classes is reached :
'just as a sick body . . is sometimes at strife with itself . . , so
is this sick city. It falls ill and makes war on itself on the
slightest pretext, whenever the one party or the other manages
to obtain help from qutside, the one from an oligarchic city,
or the other from a democracy. And does not this sick state
sometimes break into civil war even without any such help from

outside ? ' 13 This civil war begets democracy : ' Democracy
is^ born . . when the poor win the day, killing some . . ,
banishing others, and sharing with the rest the rights of citizen-
ship and of public offices, on terms of equality . .'

Plato's description of democracy is a vivid but intensely
hostile and unjust parody of the political life of Athens, and of
the democratic creed which Pericles had formulated in a manner
which has never been surpassed, about three years before Plato
was born. (Pericles' programme is discussed in chapter 10,
below 14 .) Plato's description is a brilliant piece of political
propaganda, and we can appreciate what harm it must have
done if we consider, for instance, that a man like Adam, an
excellent scholar and editor of the Republic, is unable to resist
the rhetoric of Plato's denunciation of his native city. 6 Plato's
description of the genesis of the democratic man ', Adam 16
writes, * is one of the most royal and magnificent pieces of
writing in the whole range of literature, whether ancient or
modern.' And when the same writer continues : ' the descrip
tion of the democratic man as the chameleon of the humar
society paints him for all time ', then we see that Plato has succeedec
in turning one man at least against democracy, and we may
wonder how much damage his poisonous writing has done

when presented, unopposed, to lesser minds. . .

As usual when Plato's style, to use a phrase of Adan^'s 16 ,'
becomes a ' full tide of lofty thoughts and images and words ',
it does so because he urgently needs a cloak to cover the intel-
lectual nakedness of his arguments, or rather, the total absence
of any rational thought whatever. He uses invective instead,
identifying liberty with lawlessness, freedom with licence, and
equality before the law with disorder. Democrats are described
as profligate and niggardly, as insolent, lawless, and shameless,
as fierce and as terrible beasts of prey, as gratifying every whim,
as living solely for pleasure, and for unnecessary and unclean
desires. (c They fill their bellies like'the beasts ', was Heraclitus'
way of putting it.) They are accused of calling c reverence a
folly . . ; temperance they call cowardice . . ; moderation
and orderly expenditure they call meanness and boorishness ' 17 ,
etc. c And there are more trifles of this kind ', says Plato, when
the flood of his rhetorical abuse begins to abate, ' the school-
master fears and flatters his pupils . . , and old men condescend
to the young . . in order to avoid the appearance of being
sour and despotic.' (It is Plato the Masjer of the Academy

who puts this into the mouth of Socrates, forgetting that the
latter had never been a schoolmaster, and that even as an old
man he had never appeared to be sour or despotic. He had
always loved, not to * condescend ' to the young, but to treat
them, for instance the young Plato, as his comrades.) c But
the height of all this abundance of freedom . . is reached ',
Plato continues, c when slaves, male as well as female, who have
been bought on the market, are every whit as free as those
whose property they are. . . And what is the cumulative
effect of all this ? That the citizens' hearts become so very
tender that they are irritated at the mere sight of slavery and
do not suffer anybody to submit to it, not even in its mildest
forms/ Here, after all, Plato pays homage to his native city,
even though he does it unwittingly. It will for ever remain
one of the greatest triumphs of Athenian democracy that it
treated slaves humanely, and that in spite of the inhuman
propaganda of philosophers like Plato himself and Aristotle it
came, as he witnesses, very close to abolishing slavery. 18

Of much greater merit, though it too is inspired by hatred,
is Plato's description of tyranny and especially of the transition
to it. He insists that he describes things which he has seen
himself 19 ; no doubt, the allusion is to his experiences at the
court of Dionysius I, tyrant of Syracuse. The transition from
democracy to tyranny, Plato says, is most easily brought about
by a popular leader who knows how to exploit the class
antagonism between the rich and the poor within the democratic

state, and who succeeds in building up a bodyguard or a private
army of his own. The people who have hailed him first as the
champion of freedom are soon enslaved ; and then they must
fight for him, in ' one war after another which he must stir
up . . in order to make people feel the need of a general ' 20 .
With tyranny, the most abject state is reached.

A very similar survey of the various forms of government
can be found in the Statesrtian, where Plato discusses ' the origin
of the tyrant and king, of oligarchies and aristocracies, and of
democracies ' 21 . Again we find that the various forms of
existing governments are explained as debased copies of the
true model or Form of the state, of the perfect state, the standard
of all imitations, >vhich is said to have existed in the ancient
times of Cronos, fa&er of Zeus. One difference is that Plato
here distinguishes six types of debased states ; but this difference
is unimportant, especially if we remember that Plato savs in

the Republic 22 that the four types discussed are not exhaustive,
and that there are some intermediate stages. The six types
are arrived at, in the Statesman, by first distinguishing between
three forms of government, the rule of one man, of a few, and
of the many. Each of these is then subdivided into two types,
of which one is comparatively good and the other bad, according
to whether or not they imitate * the only true original ' by copying
and preserving its ancient laws 23 . In this way, three con-
servative or lawful and three utterly depraved or lawless form;
are distinguished ; monarchy, aristocracy, and a conservative
form of democracy, are the lawful imitations, in order of merit.
But democracy changes into its lawless form, and deteriorates
further, through oligarchy, the lawless rule of the few, into a
lawless rule of the one, tyranny, which, just as Plato has said
in the Republic, is the worst of all. " v

That tyranny, the most evil statej need not be the end of
the development is indicated in a passage in the Laws which
partly repeats, and partly 24 connects with, the story of the
Statesman. ' Give me a state governed by a young tyrant ',
exclaims Plato there, c . . who has the good fortune to be the
contemporary of a great legislator, and to meet him by some
happy accident. What more could a^od do for a city which
he wants to make happy ? ' Tyranny, the most evil state, ma}
be reformed in this way. (This agrees with the remark in the
Laws, quoted above, that all change is evil, ' with the possible
exception of the change of an evil thing '. There is no doubt
that Plato, when speaking of the great lawgiver and the young
tyrant, must have been thinking of himself and his various ill-
fated experiments with young tyrants which will be dealt with
later, and especially of his attempts at reforming the younger

Dionysius' tyranny over Syracuse.)

One of the main objects of Plato's analysis of political develop-
ments is to ascertain the driving force of all historical change.
In the Laws, the historical survey is explicitly undertaken with
this aim in view : * Have not uncounted thousands of cities
been born during this time . . and has not each of them been
under a! kinds of government ? . . Let us, if we can, get hold
of the cause of so much change. I hope that we may thus
reveal the secret both of the birth of constitutions, and also of
their changes or revolutions.' 25 As the /esult of these investi-
gations he discovers the sociological law that internal disunion,
class war fomented by the antagonism of economic class interests,

is the driving force of all political revolutions. But Plato's
formulation of this fundamental law goes even further. He
insists that only internal sedition within the ruling class itself
can weaken it so much that its rule can be overthrown.
' Changes in any constitution originate, without exception,
within the ruling class itself, and only when this class becomes
the seat of disunion ' 26 , is his formula in the Republic ; and in
the Laws he says (possibly referring to this passage of the
Republic) : ' How can a kingship, or any other form of govern-
ment, ever be destroyed by anybody but the rulers themselves ?
Have we forgotten what we said a while ago, when dealing with
this subject, as we did the other day ? ' This sociological law,
together with the observation that economic interests are the
most likely causes of disunion, is Plato's clue to history. But
it is more. It is also the clue to his analysis of the conditions
necessary for the establishment of political equilibrium, i.e. for
arresting political change. He assumes that these conditions
were realized in the best or perfect state of ancient times.

Plato's description of the perfect or best state has usually
been interpreted as the Utopian programme of a progressivist.
In spite of his repeated assertions, in the Republic, Timaeus, and
Critias, that he is describing the distant past, and in spite of the
parallel passages in the Laws whose historical intention is obvious,
it is assumed that it was his whole intention to give a veiled
description of the future. But I think that Plato meant what
he said, and that many characteristics of his best state, especially
as described in Books Two to Four of the Republic, are intended
(like his accounts of primitive society in the Statesman and the
Laws) to be historical 27 , or perhaps pre-historical. It is different
with some other features, especially with the kingship of the
philosophers (described in Books Five to Seven of the Republic) ;
features of which Plato himself says that they may belong only
to the timeless world of Forms or Ideas, to the * City in Heaven '.
These intentionally unhistorical features will be discussed later,

together with Plato's ethico-political demands. It must, of
course, be admitted that he did not intend even in his descrip-
tion of the primitive or ancient constitutions to give an exact
historical account ; he certainly knew that he did not possess
the necessary data for achieving anything like that. But I
believe that he made a t serious attempt to reconstruct the ancient
tribal forms of social life as well as he could. There is no reason
to doubt this, especially since the attempt was, in a good number

of its details, very successful. It could hardly be otherwise,
since Plato arrived at his picture by an idealized description of
the ancient Cretan and Spartan tribal aristocracies. With his
acute sociological intuition he had seen that these forms were
not only old, but petrified, arrested ; that they were relics of
a still older form. And he concluded that this still older form
had been even more stable, more securely arrested. This very
ancient and accordingly very good and very stable state he
tried to reconstruct in such a way as to make clear how it had
been kept free from disunion ; how class war had been avoided,
and how economic interests had been reduced to a minimum,
and kept well under control. These are the main problems of
Plato's reconstruction of the best state.

How does Plato solve the problem of avoiding class war ?
Had he been a progressivist, he might have hit at the idea of
a classless, equalitarian society ; for, as we can see for instance
from his own parody of Athenian democracy, there were strong
equalitarian tendencies at work in Athens. But he was not out
to construct a state that might come, but a state that had
been the father of the Spartan state, which was certainly not
a classless society. It was a slave state and accordingly, Plato's
best state is based on the most rigid class distinctions. It is a
caste state. The problem of avoiding class war is solved, not
by abolishing classes, but by giving the ruling class a superiority
which is unchallenged, and which cannot be challenged. For,
as in Sparta, the ruling class alone is permitted to carry arms, 1
it alone has any political or other rights, and it alone receives
education, i.e. a specialized training in the art of keeping down
its human sheep or its human cattle. (In fact, its overwhelming
superiority disturbs Plato a little ; he fears that ' they may
worry the sheep ', instead of merely shearing them, and c act as
wolves rather than dogs ' 28 . This problem is considered later
in the chapter.) As long as the ruling class is united, there
can be no challenge of their authority, and consequently no
class war.

Plato distinguishes three classes in his best state, the guardians,^,
their armed auxiliaries or warriors, and the working class. But*
actually there are only two castes, the armed and trained rulers

and the unarmed and uneducated ruled, for the guardians are
old and wise warriors who have been promoted from the ranks
of auxiliaries. That Plato divides his ruling caste into two
classes, the guardians and the auxiliaries, without elaborating

similar subdivisions within the working class, is largely due to
the fact that he is interested only in the rulers. The workers
do not interest him at all, they are only human cattle whose
sole function is to provide for the material needs of the ruling
class ; and Plato even forbids his rulers to legislate for them
and their petty problems. For this reason, our information
about the workers is extremely scanty ; but Plato's silence is
not wholly uninterrupted. ' Are there not drudges ', he asks
once, c who possess not a spark of intelligence and are unworthy
to be admitted into the community, but who have strong bodies
for hard labour ? ' 29 Since this nasty remark has given rise to
the comforting comment that Plato does not admit slaves into
his city, I may here point out that this view is mistaken. It
is true that Plato does not state explicitly that there are slaves
in his best city. But in his description of timocracy, the second
best state, and the one directly following the best, he says of
the timocratic man : c He will be inclined to treat slaves cruelly,
for he does not despise them as much as a well-educated man
would.' But since only in the best city can education be found
which is superior to that of timocracy, we are bound to conclude
that there are slaves in Plato's best city, and that they are properly
despised. Plato's righteous contempt for them is probably the
reason why he does not elaborate the point. This conclusion
is fully corroborated by the Laws, and the most inhuman attitude
towards slaves adopted there.

Since the ruling class alone has political power, including
the power of keeping the number of the human cattle within
such limits as to prevent them from becoming a danger, the
whole problem of preserving the state is reduced to that of
preserving the internal unity of the master class. How is this
unity of the rulers preserved ? By training and other psycho-
logical influences, but otherwise mainly by the elimination of
economic interests which may lead to disunion. This economic
abstinence is achieved and t controlled by the introduction of
communism, i.e. by the abolition of private property, especially
in precious metals, which were forbidden in Sparta too. (This
communism is confined to the ruling class, which alone must
be kept free from disunion ; quarrels among the ruled are not
worthy of consideration.) Since all property is common
property, there must also be a common ownership of women
and children. No member of the ruling class must be able to
identify his children, or his parents. The family must be

destroyed, or rather, extended to cover the whole warrior class.
Family loyalties might otherwise become a possible source of
disunion ; therefore ' each should look upon all as if belonging
to one family 9 30 . (That this suggestion was neither so novel
nor so revolutionary as it sounds is clear if we consider, Vfor
instance, the Spartan restrictions on the privacy of family life,
such as common meals, etc., constantly referred to by Platp.)
But even this common ownership of women and children is riot
quite sufficient to guard the ruling class from all economic
dangers. It is important to avoid prosperity as well as poverty.
Both are dangers to unity ; poverty, because it drives people
to adopt desperate means to satisfy their needs ; prosperity,
because most change has arisen from abundance, from an
accumulation of wealth which makes dangerous experiments
possible. Only a communist system which has room neither
for great want nor for great wealth can reduce economic interests
to a minimum, and guarantee the unity of the ruling class.

The communism of the ruling caste can thus be derived
from Plato's fundamental sociological law of change ; it is a
necessary condition of the political stability of his class state.
But although an important condition, it is not a sufficient one.
In order that the ruling class may feel really united, that it
should feel like one tribe, i.e. like one big family, pressure from
without the class is as necessary as are the ties between the
members of the class. This pressure can be secured by empha-
sizing and widening the gulf between the rulers and the ruled.
/The stronger the feeling that the ruled are a different and an
altogether inferior race, the stronger will be the sense of unity
among the rulers. We arrive in this way at the fundamental
principle, announced only after some hesitation, that there must
be no mingling between the classes 31 : * Any meddling or
changing over from one class to another *, says Plato, c is a great
crime against the city and may rightly be denounced as the
basest wickedness.' But such a rigid division of the classes
must be justified, and an attempt to justify it can only be based
on the claim that the rulers are much superior to the ruled.
Accordingly, Plato tries to justify his class division by the three-
fold claim that the rulers are vastly superior in three respects
in race, in education, and in their scale of values. Plato's
moral valuations, which are, of course, identical with those of
the rulers of his best state, will be discussed in chapters 6 to 8 ;
I may therefore confine myself here to describing some of his

ideas concerning the origin, the breeding, and the education of

his ruling class. (Before proceeding to this description, I wish
to express my antagonism to the opinion that any kind of
superiority, whether racial or educational or moral, would
establish a claim to political prerogatives, even if such superiority
could be ascertained. Most people in civilized countries nowa-
days admit racial superiority to be a myth ; but even if it were
an established fact, it should not create special political rights,
though it might create special moVal responsibilities for the
superior persons. Analogous demands should be made of those
who are educationally and morally superior ; and I think that
the opposite claims of certain intellectualists and moralists only
show how utterly unsuccessful their education has been, since
it has not even made them aware of their own limitations, and
of their Pharisaism.)

If we want to understand Plato's views about the origin,
breeding, and education, of his ruling class, we must not lose
sight of the two main points of our analysis. We must keep
in mind, first of all, that Plato is considering a city of the past,
although one connected with the present in such a way that
certain of its features are still discernible in existing states, for
instance, in Sparta ; and secondly, that he is reconstructing his
city with special care for the conditions of its stability, and
that he seeks the guarantees for this stability solely within the
ruling class itself, and more especially, in its unity and strength.]

Regarding the origin of the ruling class, it may be mentioned
that Plato speaks in the Statesman of a time, prior even to that
of his best state, when e God himself was the shepherd of men,
ruling over them just as man . . still rules over the beasts.
There was . . no ownership of women and children ' 32 . This
is not merely the simile of the good shepherd ; in the light of
what Plato says in the Laws, it must be interpreted more literally
than that. For there we are told that this primitive society,
which is prior even to the fcrst and best city, is one of nomad
hill shepherds under a patriarch : c Government originated '^
says Plato there of the period prior to the first settlement, c . . as^
the rule of the eldest who inherits authority from his father or
mother ; all the others followed him like a flock of birds, thus
forming one troop ruled by a patriarchal authority, which is
the most just of all "claims to royal power.' These nomad
tribes, we hear, settled in the cities of the Peloponnese, especially
in Sparta, under the name of c Dorians f . How this happened

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is not very clearly explained, but we understand Plato's reluctance
when we get a hint that the * settlement ' was in fact a violent
subjugation. Since this is, for all we know, the true story of
the Dorian settlement in the Peloponnese, we have every reason
to consider that Plato intended his story as a serious description

of prehistoric events ; describing not only the origin of the
Dorian master race but also the origin of their human cattle,
i.e. the original inhabitants. In a parallel passage in the
Republic, Plato gives us a mythological yet very pointed descrip-
tion of the conquest itself, when dealing with the origin of the
* earthborn ', the ruling class of the best city. (The Myth of
the Earthborn will be discussed from a different point of view
in chapter 8.) Their victorious march into the city, previously
founded by the workers, is described as follows : e After having
armed and trained the earthborn, let us make them advance,
under the command of the guardians, till they arrive in the
city. Then let them look round to find out for their camp the
spot that is most suitable for keeping down the inhabitants,
should anyone show unwillingness to obey the law, and for
holding back external enemies, who may come down like wolves
on the fold. 5 This short but triumphant tale of the subjugation
of a sedentary population by a conquering war horde (who are
identified, in the Statesman, with the nomad hill shepherds of
the period before the settlement) must be kept in mind when
we interpret Plato's reiterated insistence that good rulers, whether
gods or demigods or guardians, are patriarch shepherds of men,
and that the true political art, the art of ruling, is a kind of
herdsmanship, i.e. the art of managing and keeping down the
human cattle. And it is in this light that we must consider his
description of the breeding and training of c the auxiliaries who
are subject to the rulers like sheep-dogs to the shepherds of
the state *.

The breeding and the education of the auxiliaries, i.e. of the
ruling class of Plato's best state, is, like their carrying of arms,
a class symbol and therefore a class prerogative 33 . And like
arms, breeding and education are not empty symbols, but
instruments of class rule, and necessary conditions of the stability
of this rule. They are treated by Plato solely from this point
of view, i.e. as powerful political weapons, as means for the
herding of the human cattle as well as foy the unification of the'
ruling class.

To this end, it is important that the master class should feel

as one superior master race. * The race of the guardiansjnast
be kept pure ' 34 , says Plato (in defence of infanticide), when
developing the racialist argument that we breed animals with
great care while neglecting our own race, an argument which
has been repeated ever since. (Infanticide was not an Athenian
institution ; Plato, seeing that it was practised at Sparta for
eugenic reasons, concluded that it must be ancient and there-
fore good.) He demands that the same principles be applied
to the breeding of the master race as an experienced breeder

applies to dogs, horses, or birds. * If you did not breed them
in this way, don't you think that the race of your birds or dogs
would quickly degenerate ? 9 argues Plato ; and he draws the
conclusion that c the same principles apply to the race of men '.
The racial qualities demanded from the guardian or an auxiliary
are, more specifically, those of a sheep-dog. * Our warrior-
athletes . . must be vigilant like watch-dogs \ demands Plato,
and he asks : ' Is there any difference, so far as their natural
fitness for keeping guard is concerned, between a gallant youth
and a well-bred dog ? ' In his enthusiasm and admiration for
the dog, Plato goes so far as to discern in him a fi genuine
philosophical nature ' ; for ' is not the love of learning identical
with the philosophical attitude ? '

The main difficulty which besets Plato is that guardians and
auxiliaries must be endowed with a character that is fierce and
gentle at the same time. It is clear that they must be bred to
be fierce, since they must c meet any danger in a fearless and
unconquerable spirit '. Yet c if their nature is to be like that,
how are they to be kept from being violent against one another,
or against the rest of the citizens ? ' 35 Indeed, it would be
* simply monstrous if the shepherds should keep dogs . . who
would worry the sheep, behaving like wolves rather than dogs \
The problem is important from the point of view of the political
equilibrium, or rather, of the stability of the state, for Plato
does not rely on an equilibrium of the forces of the various
classes, since that would be unstable. A control of the master
class and its arbitrary powers through the opposing force of the
ruled is out of question, for the superiority of the master class
must remain unchallenged. The only admissible control of the
master class is therefore self-control. Just as the ruling class
must exercise economic* abstinence, i.e. refrain from an excessive
economic exploitation of the ruled, so it must also be able to
refrain from too great fierceness in its dealings with the ruled.

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But this can only be achieved if the fierceness of its nature is
balanced by its gentleness. Plato finds this a very serious
problem, since * the fierce nature is the exact opposite of the
gentle nature '. His speaker, Socrates, reports that he is per-
plexed, until he remembers the dog again. c Well-bred dogs are
by nature most gentle to their friends and acquaintances, but
the very opposite to strangers ', he says. It is therefore proved
c that the character we try to give our guardians is not contrary
to nature '. The aim of breeding the master race is thus
established, and shown to be attainable. It has been derived
from an analysis of the conditions which are necessary for
keeping the state stable.

Plato's educational aim is exactly the same. It is the purely

political aim of stabilizing the state by blending a fierce and a
gentle element in the character of the rulers. The two disciplines
in which children of the Greek upper class were educated,
gymnastics and music (the latter, in the wider sense of the word,
included all literary studies), are correlated by Plato with the
two elements of character, fierceness and gentleness. ' Have you
not observed ', asks Plato 36 , ' how the character is affected by
an exclusive training in gymnastics without music, and how it
is affected by the opposite training ? . . Exclusive preoccupa-
tion with gymnastics produces men who are fiercer than they
ought to be, while an analogous preoccupation with music makes
them too soft . . But we maintain that our guardians must
combine both of these natures . . This is why I say that some
god must have given man these two arts, music and gymnastics ;
and their purpose is not so much to serve soul and body
respectively, but rather to tune properly the two main strings ',
i.e. the two elements of the soul, gentleness and fierceness.
4 These are the outlines of our system of education and training ',
Plato concludes his analysis.

In spite of the fact that Plato identifies the gentle element
of the soul with her philosophic disposition, and in spite of the
fact that philosophy is going to play such a dominant role in
the later parts of the Republic, he is not at all biased in favour
of the gentle element of the soul, or of musical, i.e. literary,
education. His impartiality in balancing the two elements is
the more remarkable as it leads him to impose the most severe
restrictions on literary education, compared with what was cus-
tomary in the Athens of his day. This, of course, is only part
of his general tendency to prefer Spartan customs to those of

Athens. (Crete, his other model, was even more anti-musical
than Sparta 37 .) Plato's political principles of literary education
are based upon a simple comparison. Sparta, he saw, treated
its human cattle just a little too harshly ; this is a symptom or
even an admission of a feeling of weakness 38 , and therefore a
symptom of the incipient degeneration of the master class.
Athens, on the other hand, was altogether too liberal and slack
in her treatment of slaves. Plato took this as proof that Sparta
insisted just a little too much on gymnastics, and Athens, of
course, far too much on music. This simple estimate enabled
him readily to reconstruct what in his opinion must have been
the true measure or the true blend of the two elements in the
education of the best state, and to lay down the principles of
his educational policy. Judged from the Athenian viewpoint,
it is nothing but the demand that all literary education be
strangled 39 by a close adherence to the example of Sparta with
its strict state control of all literary matters. Not only poetry
but even music in the ordinary sense of the term are to be con-

trolled by a rigid censorship and they are to be devoted entirely
to increasing the stability of the state by making the young
more conscious of class discipline 40 , and thus more ready to
serve class interests. Plato even forgets that it is the function
of music to make the young more gentle, for he demands such
forms of music as will make them braver, i.e. fiercer. (Con-
sidering that Plato was an Athenian, his arguments concerning
music proper appear to me almost intolerable in their reactionary
and superstitious intolerance, especially if compared with a more
enlightened contemporary criticism 41 . But even now he has
many musicians on his side, possibly because they are flattered
by his high opinion of the importance of music, i.e. of its political
power. The same is true of educationists, and even more of
philosophers, since Plato demands that they should rule ; a
demand which will be discussed in chapter 8.)

The political principle that determines the education of the
soul, namely, the preservation of the stability of the state,
determines also that of the body. The aim is simply that of
Sparta. While the Athenian citizen was educated to a general
versatility, Plato demands that the ruling class shall be trained
as a class of professional warriors, ready to strike against enemies
from without or from Within the state. Children of both sexes,
we are told twice, ' must be taken on horseback within the
sight of actual war ; and provided it can be done safely, they

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must be brought into battle, and made to taste blood ; just as
one does with young hounds ' 42 . The description of a modern
writer who characterizes contemporary totalitarian education
as * an intensified and continual form of mobilization ', fits
Plato's whole system of education very well indeed.

This is an outline of Plato's theory of the best or most ancient
state, in which the human cattle were treated just as a wise
but hardened shepherd treats his sheep ; not too cruelly, but
with the proper contempt. . . As an analysis both of Spartan
social institutions and of the conditions of their stability and
instability, and as an attempt at reconstructing more rigid and
primitive forms of tribal life, this description is excellent indeed.
(Only the descriptive aspect is dealt with in this chapter. The
ethical aspects will be discussed later.) I believe that much
in Plato's writings that has been usually considered as mere
mythological or Utopian speculation can in this way be inter-
preted as sociological description and analysis. If we look, for
instance, at his myth of the triumphant war hordes subjugating
a settled population, then we must admit that from the point
of view of descriptive sociology it is most successful. In fact,
it could even claim to be an anticipation of an interesting
(though possibly too sweeping) modern theory of the origin of

the state, according to which centralized and organized political
power generally has its origin in such a conquest 43 . There
may be more descriptions of this kind in Plato's writings than
we can at present estimate.

To sum up. In an attempt to understand and to interpret
the changing social world as he experienced it, Plato was led
to develop a systematic historicist sociology in great detail. He
thought of existing states as decaying copies of an unchanging
Form or Idea. He tried to reconstruct this Form or Idea of
a state, or at least to describe a society which resembled it as
closely as possible. Along with ancient traditions, he used as
material for his reconstruction thg results of his analysis of
Spartan and Cretan social institutions, the most ancient forms
of social life he could find in Greece, which he acutely recognized
as arrested forms of even older tribal societies. But in order
to make a proper use of this material, he needed a principle
for distinguishing between the good or original or ancient
features of existing institutions, and their, symptoms of decay.
This principle he found in his law of political revolutions,
according to which disunion in the ruling class, and their pre*

occupation with economic affairs, are the origin of all social
change. His best state was therefore to be reconstructed in
such a way as to eliminate all the germs and elements of disunion
and decay as radically as this could be done ; that is to say,
it was to be constructed out of the Spartan state with an eye
to the conditions necessary for the unbroken unity of the master
class, guaranteed by its economic abstinence, its breeding, and
its training. >J

Interpreting existing societies as decadent copies of an ideal
state, Plato furnished Hesiod's somewhat crude views of human
history at once with a theoretical background and with a wealth
of practical application. He developed a remarkably realistic
historicist theory which found the cause of social change in
Heraclitus' disunion, and in the strife of classes in which he
recognized the driving as well as the corrupting forces of history.
He applied these historicist principles to the story of the Decline
and Fall of the Greek city-states, and especially to a criticism
of democracy which he described as effeminate and degenerate.
And we may add that later, in the Laws 44 , he applied them
also to a story of the Decline and Fall of the Persian Empire,
thus making the beginning of a long series of Decline-and-Fall
dramatizations of the histories of empires and civilizations.
(O. Spengler's notorious Decline of the West is perhaps the worst
but not the last 45 of them.) All this, I think, can be interpreted
as an attempt, and a most impressive one, to explain, and to
rationalize, his experience of the breakdown of the tribal society ;

an experience analogous to that which had led Heraclitus 'to
develop the first philosophy of change.

But our analysis of Plato's descriptive sociology is still incom-
plete. His stories of the Decline and Fall, and with it nearly
all the later stories, exhibit at least two features which we have
not discussed so far. He conceived these declining societies as
some kind of organism, and the decline as a process similar to
ageing. And he believed that the decline is well deserved, in
the sense that moral decay, a fall and decline of the soul, precedes
that of the social body. This aspect of Plato's sociology plays
an important role in his theory of the first change, in the Story
of the Number and of the Fall of Man. This theory, and its
connection with the doctrine of Forms or Ideas, will be discussed
in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5 : NATURE AND CONVENTION

Plato was not the first to approach social phenomena in the
spirit of investigation. The beginning of social science goes
back at least to the generation of Protagoras, the first of the
great thinkers who called themselves * Sophists '. It is marked
by the distinction between two different elements in man's
environment his natural environment and his social environ-
ment. This is a distinction which is difficult to make and to
grasp, as can be inferred from the fact that even now it is not
clearly established in our minds. It has been questioned ever
since the time of Protagoras. Most of us, it seems, have a strong
inclination to accept the peculiarities of our social environment
as if they were ' natural '.

It is one of the characteristic features of the magical attitude
of a primitive tribal or ' closed ' society that it lives in a charmed
circle x of unchanging taboos, of laws and customs which are
felt to be as inevitable as the rising of the sun, or the cycle of
the seasons, or similar obvious regularities of nature. And it
is only after this magical 6 closed society ' has actually broken
down that a theoretical understanding of the difference between
* nature ' and * society ' can develop. An analysis of this
development presupposes a clear grasp of the distinction between
(a) natural laws, or laws of nature, or positive laws, such as the
laws of the apparent motion of the sun, or the law of gravity ;
and (b) normative laws, or standards, or norms, i.e. rules that
forbid or demand certain jnodes of conduct, or certain pro-
cedures ; examples are the laws of the Athenian Constitution,
or the rules pertaining to the election of Members of Parliament,
or the Ten Commandments. I believe that the distinction
between natural and normative laws is fundamental, and I
think that the various efforts to bridge the gap have been entirely
unsuccessful. But I am not going to assume this without dis-
cussion. For instance, I shall later discuss the claim that certain

norms are c natural ' in some sense or other. But in order to
discuss such a claim at all, it is necessary first to distinguish as
clearly as possible between laws in the sense of (a) and laws in
the sense of (i), and not to confuse the issue 1 by a bad terminology.
Thus we shall reserve the term ' natural laws * exclusively for
laws of type (a), and we shall refuse to do as has often been

done and apply this term to any norms which have been claimed
to be c natural '. The confusion is quite unnecessary since it is
easy to speak of c natural rights ' or of c natural norms ' when
laws of type (V) are meant.

I believe that it is necessary for the understanding of Plato's
sociology to consider how the difference between natural and
normative laws developed. I shall first distinguish the starting
point and the last step of the development, and later three
intermediate steps, which all play a part in Plato's theory.
The starting point can be described as a naive monism. It may
be said to be characteristic of the ' closed society '. The last
step, which I describe as critical dualism (or critical conventional-
ism), is characteristic of the ' open society '. The fact that there
are still many who try to avoid making this step may be taken
as an indication that we are still in the midst of the transition
from the closed to the open society. (With all this, compare
chapter 10.)

The starting point which I have called ' naive monism ' is
the stage at which the distinction between natural and normative
laws is not yet made. Unpleasant experiences are the means
by which man learns to adjust himself to his environment. No
distinction is made between sanctions imposed by other men,
if a normative taboo is broken, and unpleasant experiences
suffered in the natural environment. Within this stage, we may
further distinguish between two possibilities. The one can be
described as a naive naturalism. At this stage regularities, whether
natural or conventional, are felt to be beyond the possibility
of any alteration whatever. But I believe that this stage is only
an abstract possibility, which we probably never realized. More
important is a stage which we can describe as a naive conventional-
ism, at which both natural and normative regularities are
experienced as expressions of, and as dependent upon, the
decisions of man-like gods or demons. At this stage even the
natural laws, under certain exceptional circumstances, seem to
be open to modifications, an^ with the help of magical practices
man may sometimes influence them ; and natural regularities
appear to be upheld by sanctions, as if they were normative.
This point is well illustrated by Heraclitus' saying : ' The sun

will not outstep the measure of his path ; but if he does, then
the goddesses of Fate? the handmaids of Justice, will know how
to find him.' 2

The breakdown of magic tribalism is closely connected with

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the realization that taboos are different in various tribes, that
they are imposed and enforced by man, and that they may be
broken without unpleasant repercussions if one can only escape
the sanctions imposed by one's fellow-men. This realization is
quickened when it is observed that laws are altered and made
by human lawgivers. I think not only of such lawgivers as
Solon, but also of the laws which were made and enforced by
the common people of democratic cities. These experiences
may lead to a conscious differentiation between the man-enforced
normative laws or conventions, and the natural regularities
which are beyond his power. When this differentiation is
clearly understood, then we can describe the position reached
as a critical dualism, or critical conventionalism. In the develop-
ment of Greek philosophy this dualism of facts and norms
announces itself in terms of the opposition between nature and
convention. 3

In spite of the fact that this position was reached a long time
ago by the Sophist Protagoras, an older contemporary of Socrates,
it is still so little understood that it seems necessary to explain
it in some detail. First, we must not think that critical dualism
implies a theory of the historical origin of norms. It has nothing
to do with the historical assertion that norms in the first place
were consciously made or introduced by man, instead of having
been found by him to be simply there (whenever he was first
able to find anything of this kind). It therefore has nothing to
do with the assertion that norms originate with man, and not
with God, nor does it underrate the importance of normative
laws. Least of all has it anything to do with the assertion that
norms, since they are conventional, i.e. man-made, are therefore
' merely arbitrary '. Critical dualism merely asserts that norms
and normative laws can be made and changed by man, more
especially by a decision or convention to observe them or to
alter them, and that it is therefore man who is morally responsible
for them ; not perhaps for the nowns which he finds to exist
in society when he first begins to reflect upon them, but for the
norms which he is prepared to tolerate once he has found out
that he can do something to alter them. Norms are man-made
in the sense that we must blame nobody but ourselves for them ;
neither nature, nor God. It is our business to improve them
as much as we can. This last remark implies that by describing
norms as conventional, I do not mean that they must be
arbitrary, or that one set of normative laws will do just as well